

# Conflict Between Irrational Desires & External Reality

## **The Outer Conflict**

Outer conflict is the conflict between the pleasure-seeking emotions and the social and physical reality. Outer conflict occurs when the search for pleasure comes in conflict with other people or the physical environment itself.

The basic problem of life is our conflict with our circumstances. The world around us is not behaving, as we want. Even our body and mind do not behave, as we want. In other words, we have no control over our circumstances. That is, even with our modern scientific technology we are not able to gain full control over our circumstances. Modern science can make a few of our jobs easy, but still we are not in control of our circumstances. Man has been a toolmaker from the beginning. New technology is only making better tools for us using human intelligence. Still mankind is as helpless as before.

This helplessness of mankind in a world that is difficult to understand, coupled with mankind's inability to gain control even over the mind, has led to the search for supernatural power to control circumstances. When natural human power fails, mankind seeks supernatural power. This much-needed supernatural power, man conceives in the form of gods. By believing in these supernatural beings, mankind gains hope and courage to live and endure the difficulties of life. Without this contrived world of supernatural beings, mankind would be lost in hopelessness. This however is only an escape from reality into fantasy. It is not a real solution of the problem but a placebo.

What the Buddha points out, however, is that our conflict with our circumstances is due to our irrational emotions. It is really our blind emotions that are in conflict with the reality of our circumstances. Our desires are unrealistic. We are seeking permanence in an impermanent world. We are not able to accept reality as it is. We cannot see ourselves growing old because we are attached to youthfulness. We cannot think of dying because we are attached to life. We cannot endure what is unpleasant because we react to it with hate. We are loath to part from what is pleasant because we become emotionally attached to it. We cannot bear frustration of our unfulfilled desires, because we seek immediate satisfaction of these desires.

If unrealistic emotions cause us to come in to conflict with reality, then what needs to be done is not to change reality to suit our unrealistic desires but **to change our unrealistic desires to suit reality**. If we try to change reality it is likely that we will only be escaping from reality into a dream world where all desires will be satisfied through supernatural powers; and that is insanity. If religion was such an escape, it could only be seen as a collective neurosis, as Sigmund Freud saw it.

This is why, **for the Buddhist, religion is a transformation of self, and not an unrealistic effort to change reality with the help of supernatural power**. This is why, Buddhists do not seek help in gods, but in the natural human potential, which is the power of human intelligence (*buddhi*). To seek help in human intelligence is to seek help in one's own intelligence and that of others. The Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the Sangha symbolize this successful human intelligence in concrete form. Buddha is the one who achieved perfection in intelligence, *Dhamma* is his teaching, and the *Sangha* is the society of followers. This was why the Buddha said, "Live with oneself as light, oneself as refuge and no other refuge; live with the *Dhamma* as light, the *Dhamma* as refuge and no other refuge." This is why the true Buddhist takes refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* instead of supernatural powers.

The outer conflict can be further elaborated as follows:

Firstly, the pleasure-seeking emotional impulses clash with the interests of others. These impulses are antisocial and selfish. This is why the control of emotions is demanded by society and why social norms, laws and prisons have been instituted. Society punishes the individual who is unable or unwilling to control these self-centered impulses. Pressures from within, as well as from society, trouble the individual. Unable to deal with this conflict between emotions and society, an individual may become alienated from society and even become mentally ill.

Secondly, the search for pleasure clashes with the physical reality around. Changes in the physical environment can frustrate the emotions and disappoint the person. On the other hand, to seek pleasure always and to avoid pain is to seek permanent pleasure. We know, however, that permanent pleasure is impossible. We know that in real life we have to part from pleasure and meet pain. Life is not a bed of roses without thorns. We cannot always have pleasure and we cannot always avoid pain. Sometimes our enjoyment of pleasure can hurt other people. Often things do not happen, as we want. This conflict between emotional impulses and the external environment creates anxiety and unhappiness.

This clash between emotion and external reality is painful. Our impulses are blind, irrational and insatiable. These blind impulses drive toward an impossible goal. They seek immediate and permanent pleasure. Naturally, frustrations, disappointments, worries, anxieties, fears and dissatisfactions are bound to occur in this kind of pleasure-seeking life.

Thirdly, this search for pleasure leads to personalization and possessiveness. This means, we like to own our pleasures and bring them under our control permanently. By owning or personalizing, and identifying ourselves with what we own, we build and extend the notion of “self,” or “ego.” “I” become the center of the universe. Thus we build up a dream world of selfness and ownership and struggle to live in it as “the monarch of all I survey.” Yet, this often ends up in failure and disappointment. First we are attracted to pleasant appearances (*kama tanha*), and then it turns into a desire for ownership (*bhava tanha*). Finally, it turns into boredom, disgust, and the desire for riddance (*vibhava tanha*). This possessiveness also brings us in conflict with others. This may lead to the break-up of relationships, divorces, violent action, murder, suicide, crimes, terrorism, and even wars.

Fourthly, this pleasure seeking is accompanied by a desire for the permanent existence of what we call, “ourselves” and “our own.” Thus we begin to live in the dream world of permanent “self existence.” We wish that what we personalize as “mine” and “myself” should not grow old or die; this applies to our own bodies as well as those of our loved ones. Youthfulness is pleasant to us, while old age is unpleasant. Health is pleasant to us, while disease is unpleasant. Life is pleasant to us, while death is unpleasant. Parting from the pleasant and meeting the unpleasant is painful. Not being able to have things as we want is frustrating. The cause of this suffering is undoubtedly unrealistic desires or blind emotional impulses, which result in personalization and suffering.

It is this clash between emotional urges and reality that the Buddha described in the form of the Four-fold Supernormal Reality (Four Noble Truths), laid out in the form of:

1. The **insecurity of life** (*dukkha*)
2. **Origin** of insecurity (*samudaya*)
3. **Ending** of insecurity (*nirodha*)
4. The **method of ending** insecurity (*magga*)

The **insecurity of life** has been described as:

1. Grief, lamentation, pain, distress and exhaustion
2. Birth, aging, disease and death
3. Parting from the pleasant and meeting the unpleasant
4. Not obtaining what is desired

The **origin of the insecurity** of life is described as **the emotional urge** that is repetitive, comprising delight and lust, of fickle nature. They are as follows:

1. The emotional reaction to pleasant sensation – thirst for pleasure (*kama tanha*)
2. The emotional reaction to neutral sensation as – thirst for existence (*bhava tanha*)
3. The emotional reaction to unpleasant sensation – thirst for nonexistence (*vibhava tanha*)

The desire to have pleasure and to avoid pain is a desire to have permanent pleasure. The insecurity of life is the inability to have permanent pleasure or permanent existence. In short it is the conflict between the blind emotional thirst for permanence and the reality of impermanence. The ending of insecurity is the ending of this blind unrealistic emotional reaction or thirst.

Therefore the **ending of insecurity** is described as the dispassionate eradication of the thirst without remainder; its renunciation, relinquishment and abandonment with no more hankering.

The **method of ending insecurity** is following the Supernormal Sublime Eight-fold Way, which has been already described.

## The Inner Conflict

The conflict within is the conflict between ones emotional moods (*citta*) and ones rational faculty (*mano*). In addition to this conflict, another conflict arises between our conscience and the emotional impulses. Our conscience (*hiri-ottapa*) consists of habits cultivated in childhood during the course of childhood disciplining by adults. This conscience becomes an internal force that disciplines even adults. The conscience is a product of culture. This conscience that comes up as an emotion within begins to oppose the emotional impulses that seek pleasure. This creates an inner conflict between opposing emotions. Our conscience seeks to be good. But this goodness is achieved only through a denial of emotional impulses.

When this happens, goodness is seen to be not good. Our thinking faculty takes the side of the emotional impulses by personalizing them and defending them. If, the individual did not have a strict upbringing, his conscience will not be very strong. If ones pleasure seeking emotions are also powerful, one might become a playboy (*kâmasukallikânuyôga*). Such an individual can even become a criminal, because it may lead one to crime, being carried away by emotions, and ignoring the conscience.

On the other hand, if the conscience is powerful, one may take the side of the conscience. If an individual has had a strict upbringing, this conscience will be very strong. Such an individual can become very inhibited in behavior, and feel excessively self critical and guilty over the slightest lapse or error on his/ her part. He can become over- critical of others too. This may even result in an ascetic life of self-denial and self- mortification, when the emotions are personalized but not gratified, and instead the mind and body is punished, thinking the fault is in the body or flesh. This is what the Buddha called *attakilamatânuyôga*.

It seems that we are trapped between the horns of a dilemma. If one is brought up strictly, one may turn into an ascetic, if one is not, one may become a criminal. These conflicting emotions can drive an individual this way or the other depending on which side is stronger. If one cannot resolve the conflict one way or another, and it becomes unbearable, one may even become neurotic or psychotic, running away from reality into a false world of fantasy. This inner conflict becomes the cause of much unhappiness in our lives and it can even lead to suicide.

As mentioned earlier, these blind emotional reactions or thirst (*tanha*), which clashes with reality, is of three kinds:

1. The thirst for sensual pleasures (*kama tanha*)
2. The thirst for the presence of everything (*bhava tanha*)
3. The thirst for the absence of the unpleasant (*vibhava tanha*)

It is the urge for sensual pleasure that comes in conflict with society and the conscience, and can lead to mental illnesses such as neurosis and crime. The urge for existence of a “self” also comes in conflict with other individuals, social norms, and reality itself. This too can lead to neurosis and crime. The urge for non-existence resulting from anger toward others or oneself can lead to crime, wars, suicide, and psychosis. The details of how these urges lead to inner conflicts, neurosis, psychosis, and social conflicts, crime, terrorism, and even wars can be understood if one reads Freudian psychoanalytic literature. Some of the findings of Western psychology are a reiteration of the teachings of the Buddha.